microendoscope is an effective method for visualization of the RWM [8]. It is equipped with a working channel, which can be used in drug administration. However, the potential of microendoscopes for placing substrates on the RWM has not been evaluated, and it is important to clarify the prevalence of subjects in whom the RWM is microendoscopically visible. In the present study, we examined the potential of a specially modified microendoscope for a transtympanic approach to the RWM using human temporal bones.

Materials and methods

Ten formalin-fixed temporal bones with no middle or inner ear diseases were obtained from six individuals (aged from 68 to 76 years at death, five male, and one female). A microendoscope (0.9 mm in outer diameter, 50 mm in length; FiberTech, Tokyo, Japan) was specially modified in the fit angle for observation of the RWM through the tympanic membrane. The tip is curved 15° (Fig. 1). The view angle is 70°. It is equipped with a working channel (0.3 mm in diameter).

We used four different approaches to observe the RWM as follows: (1) transtympanic microendoscopic, (2) transtympanic microscopic, (3) transmastoid microendoscopic, and (4) transmastoid microscopic. For the transtympanic approach, a small fenestration (2 × 1 mm) was made in the posterior inferior quadrant of the tympanic membrane using a knife (Fig. 2). The microendoscope was inserted into the middle ear through this fenestration and set to provide the best view of the RWM. For observation with a microscope, the fenestration edge in the tympanic membrane was gently pushed with a curved needle to obtain the best access to the

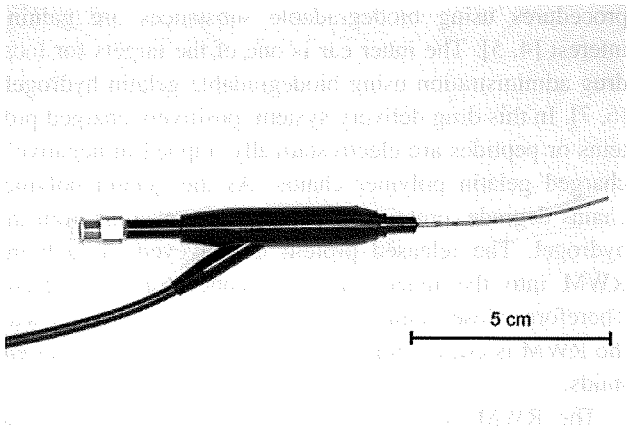

Fig. 1 A microendoscope specially modified for better visualization of the RWM. The outer diameter is 0.9 mm and the length is 50 mm. The view angle is 70°. It is equipped with a working channel (0.3 mm in diameter)

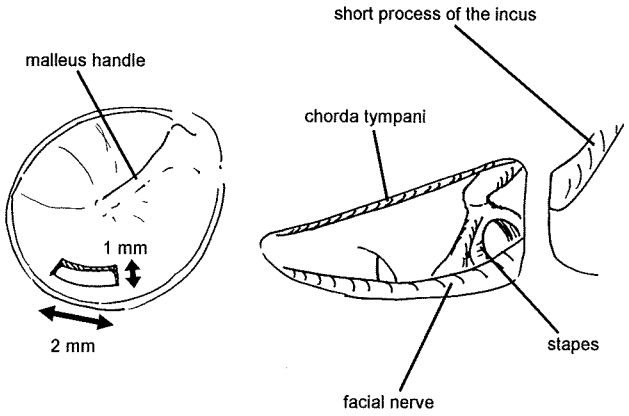

Fig. 2 A small fenestration (2 × 1 mm) was made in the posterior inferior quadrant of the tympanic membrane using a knife. Posterior hypotympanotomy was made as large as possible. In all specimens, the facial nerve and chorda tympani were skeletonized

RWM. For transmastoid approaches, canal-wall up complete mastoidectomy and posterior hypotympanotomy were performed under conventional microscopy (Leica M300, Leica Microsystems, Wetzlar, Germany). The bones covering the middle cranial fossa dura, the posterior fossa dura, and the sigmoid sinus were drilled to be as thin as possible. The bony wall of the external auditory canal was preserved. The facial nerve and chorda tympani nerve were skeletonized and the facial recess was opened as large as possible (Fig. 2).

The RWM was observed through a posterior hypotympanotomy with a microendoscope or a microscope. Surgical procedures were performed by one author (Harukazu Hiraumi). The view of the RWM and surrounding structures using the four approaches was video-captured. Frames showing best view of the RWM were converted into still images, and the area of the RWM was measured using image-processing program, ImageJ. An angled hook (1.0 mm sharp tip) was used as a reference. Total area of the RWM was measured after drilling the round window niche. The visibility of the RWM was calculated and graded into three classes: Grade I as no or little visualization of the RWM (<20%), Grade II as defined by >20%, and Grade III as defined by >70%. In three samples, the round window niche was covered with false membranes. In these cases, the false membranes were removed with a curved needle under microscopic view via posterior hypotympanotomy.

Results

A microendoscope was smoothly inserted into the middle ear cavity and the incuidostapedial joint was observed easily in all the specimens. The percentage of the area of the

RWM under direct vision was shown in the Table 1. The transtympanic microendoscopic approach enabled visualization of the RWM in all the specimens (Fig. 3). In three specimens, the RWM was totally observed (Fig. 4a). We used the incuidostapedial joint as a landmark to identify the location of the round window niche and the tip of the microendoscope was safely oriented to the RWM. No hazardous events such as ossicular dislocation or disruption of the tympanic membrane occurred. In contrast to the transtympanic microendoscopic approach, a transtympanic approach using a microscope provided visualization of the RWM in only three specimens (Fig. 3). Even in those three specimens, the view of the RWM was very limited (Fig. 4c). In the other seven specimens, the RWM was not observed, as the overhang of the round window niche was an obstacle for visualization. The visibility of the RWM through the transtympanic microendoscopic approach was significantly superior to that through transtympanic microscopic approach (Fig. 3, $P < 0.01$, Wilcoxon matched-pair signed-rank test).

In all the specimens, the transmastoid approach provided an excellent view of the RWM using either microendoscope (Fig. 4b) or microscope (Fig. 4d). The transmastoid microendoscopic approach provided a wide view of the middle ear cavity; for instance more than 70% of the tympanic membrane was visible in nine (microendoscopic), and seven (microscopic) specimens.

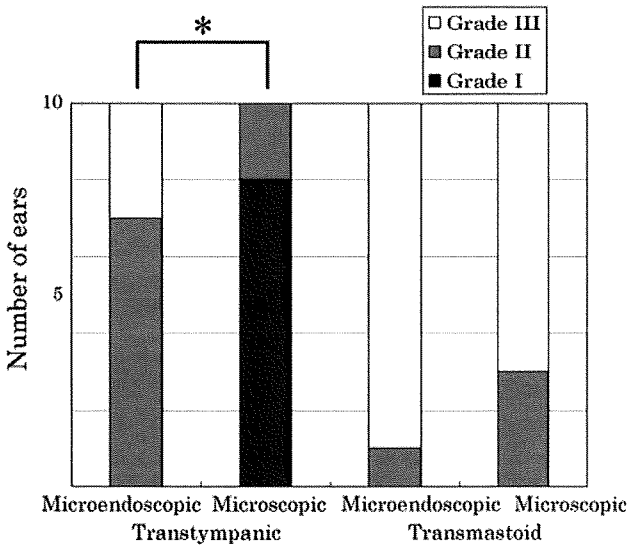

Fig. 3 The visibility of the RWM for four approaches. Grade I as no or little visualization of the RWM (<20%), Grade II as defined by >20%, and Grade III as defined by >70%. The visibility through the transtympanic microendoscopic approach was better than that with transtympanic microscopic approach

Discussion

The present results demonstrate that a microendoscope provided a satisfactory view of the RWM through a transtympanic approach with only a 2-mm incision on the tympanic membrane. Although the transmastoid microscopic approach provides an excellent view and favorable access to the RWM, this approach requires mastoidectomy and is not adequate for local drug application for treatment of SNHL. In contrast, the transtympanic microendoscopic approach requires only a small fenestration in the tympanic membrane. Therefore, the transtympanic microendoscopic approach may be applicable for office-based treatment.

Conventional endoscopes with 30° provide good visualization of the RWM [9, 10]. However, endoscopes with attached CCD cameras are not easy to handle. In office-based usage, the endoscope is usually placed just outside of the tympanic membrane [11], and tools used for drug application can hinder the view. The outer diameter is 1.7 mm or larger, requiring larger myringotomy. In addition, use of a conventional endoscope for drug delivery onto the RWM requires another channel for drug application, resulting in

Table 1 The percentage of the visible area of the round window membrane using four approaches

No	Side	Transtympanic		Transmastoid	
		Microendoscope (%)	Microscope (%)	Microendoscope (%)	Microscope (%)
1	Left	80.2	0.0	91.6	70.1
2	Left	54.5	0.0	78.1	72.0
3	Left	78.8	23.0	87.3	79.6
4	Left	59.1	0.0	73.3	84.8
5	Left	48.2	14.6	94.8	71.6
6	Right	49.7	0.0	80.7	61.3
7	Right	79.9	0.0	87.6	75.7
8	Right	39.5	0.0	66.2	42.3
9	Right	62.0	20.1	84.9	83.2
10	Right	56.9	0.0	82.8	65.4

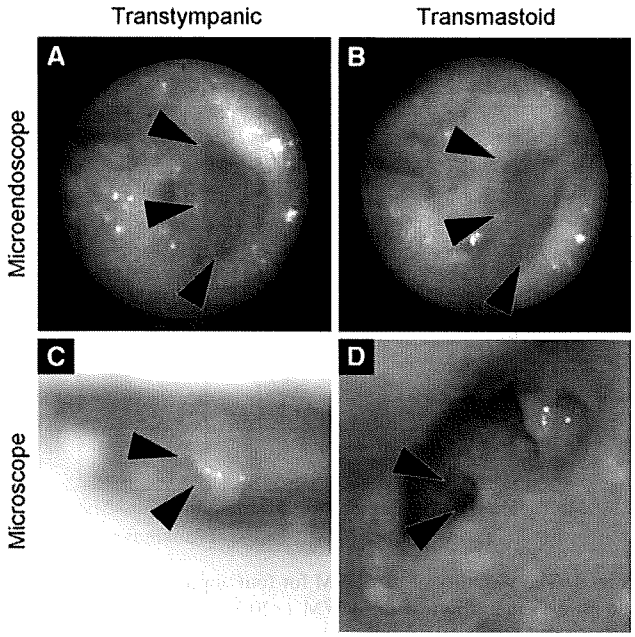

Fig. 4 The RWM of bone three observed through four approaches (*arrow heads*). The transtympanic microendoscopic approach (**a**), transmastoid microendoscopic approach (**b**), and transmastoid microscopic approach (**d**) provided good views. In the transtympanic microscopic approach (**c**), only a small part of the RWM was observed with the aid of a curved needle

increase of surgical invasion on the tympanic membrane. This means that enlargement of the size of tympanotomy or making additional tympanotomy site is necessary. Conventional microendoscopes are made for the inspection of the nasolacrymal ducts, and their tips are straight. The external auditory canal is S-shaped [12], and it is difficult to direct straight microendoscope to the RWM. The modified microendoscope used in the current study is quite smaller than conventional ones, and is connected to a CCD camera system via a cable. The curved tip fitted the external auditory canal. This configuration provides excellent handling of equipment for drug delivery. In addition, the microendoscope used in this study has a working channel that can be utilized for application of substrates onto the RWM.

The aim of the current study was to evaluate the accurate RWM drug application efficacy of a microendoscope with angles modified to ease RWM access. For clinical use of previously developed local drug delivery systems [3, 8], safe and stable visualization of the RWM through the tympanic membrane is necessary. In this manuscript, we compared the transtympanic microendoscopic approach with the transmastoid microscopic approach, since it is the most common procedure to access the RWM. The transmastoid microscopic approach is the most reliable approach for observation of the RWM, and additional removal of the round window niche enabled measurement of the total area of the RWM, which was indispensable for quantitative analysis in the present study. The view provided by a microendoscope is enough to deliver drugs or biomaterials incorporating drugs onto the RWM, although it is not satisfactory for precise surgical procedures. Previous studies have demonstrated the efficacy of biodegradable gelatin hydrogels for local application of brain-derived neurotrophic factor [6] and insulin-like growth factor 1 [7, 13]. The present findings resolve the problem of how to place a hydrogel onto the RWM in the clinic.

This study also found some drawbacks for this instrument. The resolution of the microendoscope is not as high as that of conventional microscopes, which may impede the differentiation of the false membrane from the RWM [14]. Sufficient understanding of the surgical anatomy of the middle ear is necessary for appropriate use of the microendoscope in drug delivery onto the RWM. However, we consider that refinement of the quality of view provided by microendoscopes may resolve this problem.

Conclusion

The transtympanic microendoscopic approach provided satisfactory visualization of the RWM through the tympanic membrane, indicating that the microendoscope is a useful tool for placing drugs or drug-containing materials onto the RWM.

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Conflict of interest We do not have a financial relationship with the organization that sponsored the research.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Local application of hepatocyte growth factor using gelatin hydrogels attenuates noise-induced hearing loss in guinea pigs

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Abstract

Conclusion: Local application of hepatocyte growth factor using biodegradable gelatin hydrogels attenuates noise-induced hearing loss in guinea pigs. *Objectives:* To develop an inner ear drug delivery system using gelatin hydrogels that is capable of a sustained delivery of growth factors to the cochlea. We examined the efficacy of the local application of gelatin hydrogels containing hepatocyte growth factor (HGF) in protecting cochlear hair cells from noise-induced damage. *Materials and methods:* A piece of gelatin hydrogel previously immersed in either HGF or saline was placed on the round window membrane of a guinea pig 1 h after noise exposure (4 kHz octave band noise at 120 dB sound pressure level for 3 h). Auditory function was monitored using auditory brainstem responses (ABRs), and the loss of hair cells was evaluated quantitatively. *Results:* Local HGF treatment significantly reduced the noise exposure-caused ABR threshold shifts and the loss of outer hair cells in the basal portion of the cochleae.

Keywords: *Cochlea, drug delivery, growth factor, protection, hair cell*

Introduction

Sensorineural hearing loss (SNHL) is one of the most common disabilities. However, available therapeutic options are limited to hearing aids and cochlear implants. Therefore, many investigations have concentrated on finding novel therapeutic molecules that could possibly be used in the treatment of SNHL. These studies have discovered several agents that exhibit therapeutic activity against SNHL. Despite such basic research progress, the translation of these basic findings into useful therapeutic clinical agents has yet to be achieved. One considerable obstacle to the development of such clinical applications revolves around the current lack of a safe and effective method for drug delivery to the cochlea. As a way of resolving this, we have developed a new method for local inner ear treatment that uses gelatin hydrogel as the inner ear drug delivery system [1]. Biodegradable gelatin hydrogel has been used previously for the sustained release of proteins or peptides, including growth and trophic factors [2]. We have previously demonstrated the efficacy of gelatin hydrogels in the sustained delivery of brain-derived neurotrophic factor [3] and insulin-like growth factor 1 (IGF-1) [4,5] in animal experiments. In addition, we are currently performing a clinical trial designed to examine local IGF-1 therapy that uses gelatin hydrogels for treating acute SNHL (http://www.kuhp.kyoto-u.ac.jp/~ent/ClinicalTrial/Gel_Eng.html).

Hepatocyte growth factor (HGF) was originally identified as the protein that is responsible for stimulating hepatocyte proliferation [6]. It is present in various cells and is a paracrine cellular growth and morphogenetic factor [7,8]. Hearing impairment caused by aminoglycosides is ameliorated after the transfer of the HGF gene to the inner ear via an

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intrathecal injection of the viral vector [9]. The HGF gene transfer for the treatment of SNHL has been published and patented (US Patent 7390482). Thus, local, sustained application of rhHGF might be effective for the treatment of SNHL and could potentially be approved for clinical applications in the near future.

Previous reports have documented the potential use of gelatin hydrogel for a sustained release of HGF [2,10]. Therefore, based on the previous reported data, we designed the current study to examine the efficacy of using gelatin hydrogels for local rhHGF application to treat noise-induced hearing loss (NIHL) in guinea pigs.

Materials and methods

Experimental animals

A total of 18 male 4-week-old adult Hartley guinea pigs weighing 300–350 g (Japan SLC, Hamamatsu, Japan) served as the experimental animals. Animal care was conducted under the supervision of the Institute of Laboratory Animals at the Kyoto University Graduate School of Medicine. All experimental procedures were performed in accordance with the National Institutes of Health Guidelines for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals.

Biodegradable gelatin hydrogels

The biodegradable hydrogels were prepared as described previously [3–5]. Since other studies have analyzed the in vitro HGF release profiles from hydrogels and demonstrated that a hydrogel made with 10 mM glutaraldehyde allows for optimal HGF delivery [2,10], we designed the present study to use the same type of hydrogel.

Noise exposure and drug application

Baseline auditory brainstem response (ABR) thresholds were measured just before the noise exposure. Animals were then exposed to a 4 kHz octave band noise at 120 dB sound pressure level for 3 h in a ventilated sound exposure chamber. Sound levels were monitored and calibrated at multiple locations within the sound chamber to ensure stimulus uniformity.

A 2 mm^3 piece of hydrogel was immersed in 20 µl physiological saline that contained either 1.0 µg/µl rhHGF or physiologic saline alone (control). Under general anesthesia using midazolam (2 mg/kg, intramuscular; Astellas, Tokyo, Japan) and xylazine (2 mg/kg, intramuscular; Bayer, Tokyo, Japan), the piece of hydrogel was then placed on the round window membrane in the left ear of the animals 1 h after the noise exposure ($n = 6$ for each group).

Functional analysis

ABRs were measured to assess the auditory function, with the ABR threshold measurements performed at the 4, 8, and 16 kHz frequencies. ABRs were obtained before and after exposure to the noise, and on days 3, 7, 14, and 21 after the drug application. Animals were anesthetized using midazolam and xylazine and kept warm using a heating pad. Generation of acoustic stimuli and the recordings of the evoked potentials were performed using a PowerLab/4sp (AD Instruments, Castle Hill, Australia). Acoustic stimuli, consisting of tone-burst stimuli (0.1 ms cos^2 rise/fall with a 1 ms plateau), were delivered monaurally through a speaker (ES1spc; Bioresearch Center, Nagoya, Japan) that was connected to a funnel fitted to the external auditory meatus. To record bioelectrical potentials, subdermal stainless steel needle electrodes were inserted at the vertex (ground), ventrolateral to the measured ear (active) and contralateral to the measured ear (reference). Stimuli were calibrated against a ¼-inch free-field microphone (ACO-7016; ACO Pacific, Belmont, CA, USA) connected to an oscilloscope (DS-8812 DS-538; Iwatsu Electric, Tokyo, Japan) or a sound level meter (LA-5111; Ono Sokki, Yokohama, Japan). Responses between the vertex and mastoid subcutaneous electrodes were amplified using a digital amplifier (MA2; Tucker-Davis Technologies, Alachua, FL, USA). Thresholds were determined from a set of responses at varying intensities with 5 dB SPL intervals. Electrical signals were averaged for 1024 repetitions. Thresholds at each frequency were verified at least twice.

Histological analysis

On day 21 after the drug application, animals were deeply anesthetized with midazolam and xylazine and the cochleae were exposed. After removal of otic vesicles, 4% paraformaldehyde in 0.01 mol/l phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) at pH 7.4 was gently introduced into the perilymphatic space of the cochleae. Temporal bones were then excised and immersed in the same fixative at 4°C for 4 h. After rinsing with PBS, cochleae were dissected from temporal bones and subjected to histological analysis in whole mounts. To quantitatively assess the hair cell loss, we examined three regions of the cochlear sensory epithelia that were at a distance of 40–60%, 60–80% or 80–100% from the apex.

Immunohistochemistry for myosin VIIa and F-actin labeling by phalloidin were performed to label the surviving inner hair cells (IHCs) and outer hair cells (OHCs). Anti-myosin VIIa rabbit polyclonal antibody (1:500; Proteus Bioscience, Ramona, CA, USA) was used as the primary antibody, and Alexa-546-conjugated anti-rabbit goat IgG (1:500; Molecular Probe, Eugene, OR, USA) was used as the secondary antibody. Following immunostaining for myosin VIIa, specimens were then stained with FITC-conjugated phalloidin (1:300; Molecular Probe). Specimens were viewed under a confocal microscope (TCS SP2; Leica Microsystems, Wetzlar, Germany). To test the non-specific labeling, the primary antibody was omitted from the staining procedures. Three authors (T.I., T.N., and Y.S.K.) counted the numbers of IHCs and OHCs in 0.2 mm long regions of the apical, middle or basal portions of the cochleae. The average of the values was used as the data for each animal.

Statistical analysis

Overall effects of rhHGF application on ABR threshold shifts were examined using a two-way factorial analysis of variance. When interactions were significant, multiple comparisons with Fisher's protected least significant difference (PLSD) were used for pairwise comparisons. Differences in the IHC and OHC numbers for each region of the cochlea between the rhHGF- and saline-treated cochleae groups were examined using a Student's t test. Values of $p < 0.05$ were considered statistically significant. Values are expressed as the mean $\pm$ the standard error.

Results

Auditory function

Time courses of the alterations in the ABR threshold shifts at 4, 8, and 16 kHz after the application of rhHGF or saline are shown in Figure 1. Local application of rhHGF showed a significant effect on the reduction of the ABR threshold shifts at the 16 kHz frequency ($p = 0.030$). There was also a significant difference in threshold shifts on day 21 between the rhHGF- and saline-treated animals, as shown by the Fisher's PLSD test ($p = 0.045$). No significant differences were found for the threshold shifts between the two groups at 4 or 8 kHz.

Histological protection

Immunostaining for myosin VIIa and phalloidin staining demonstrated partial degeneration of the OHCs in the 60–80% distance regions from the apex

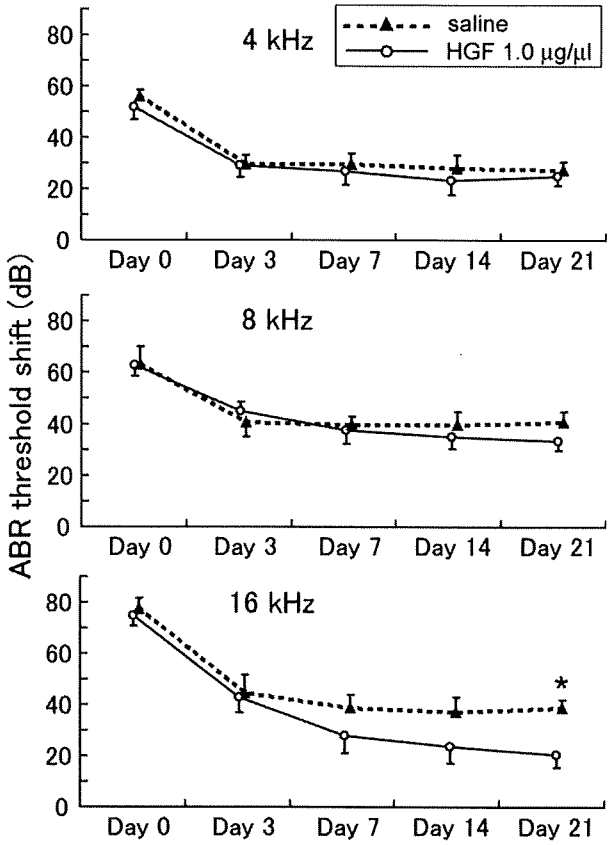

Figure 1. ABR threshold shifts after noise exposure in saline- and HGF-treated animals. An overall effect of HGF application is significant at 16 kHz (two factorial ANOVA, $p = 0.030$), not at 4 or 8 kHz. The difference in threshold shifts between saline- and HGF-treated animals is significant on day 21 at 16 kHz. *$p = 0.045$, Fisher's PLSD.

in the saline-treated cochleae (Figure 2A). The same region for the 1.0 μg/μl rhHGF-treated cochleae exhibited almost normal morphology (Figure 2B). In both experimental groups, OHC loss was not apparent in the 40–60% or 80–100% distance regions from the apex. IHCs were well maintained in every region of the cochleae in both groups. Quantitative assessments revealed a significant difference in OHC numbers in the 60–80% distance region from the apex between the saline- and rhHGF-treated cochleae (Figure 3, $p = 0.003$). No significant differences in OHC numbers were observed in the 40–60% or 80–100% distance regions. There were also no significant differences in the IHC numbers noted in any of the cochleae regions between the two experimental groups.

Discussion

Our findings indicate that local application of rhHGF using biodegradable gelatin hydrogels is effective in the attenuation of OHC damage due to noise trauma, resulting in the reduction of ABR

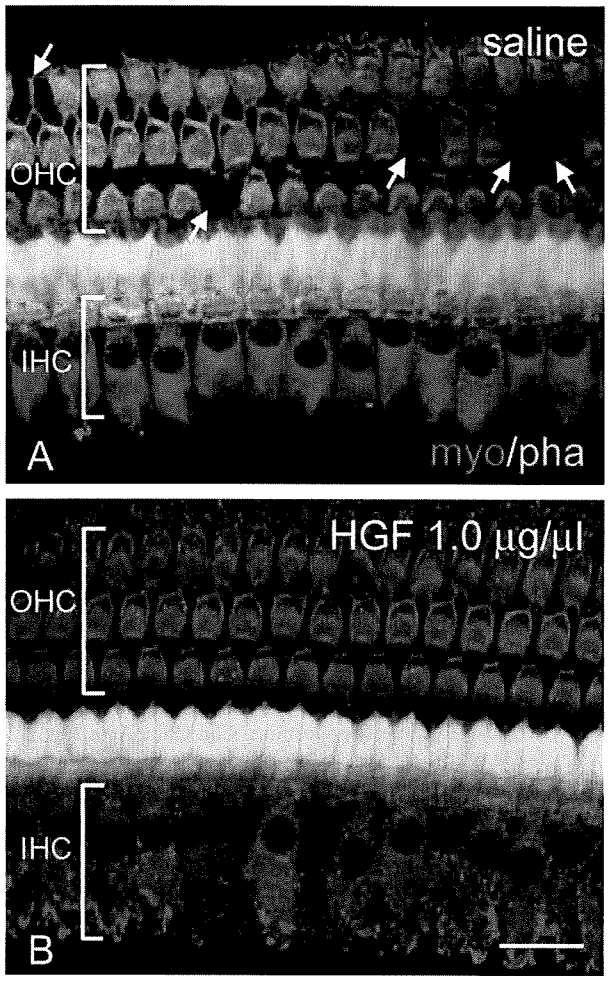

Figure 2. Immunostaining for myosin VIIa (myo) and phalloidin staining (pha) demonstrated loss of outer hair cells (OHC) in the upper basal portion of the saline-treated cochlea (A) and preservation of OHC in that of the HGF-treated cochlea (B). Arrows indicate loss of OHC. IHC, inner hair cells. Scale bar represents 20 μm.

thresholds. ABR measurements demonstrated that post-traumatic local application of rhHGF via gelatin hydrogels had a significant effect on the attenuation of threshold shifts at 16 kHz. Histological analyses demonstrated significant protection of the OHCs in the 60–80% distance from the apex, which is the region responsible for the 10–20 kHz hearing range [11].

Our previous study using IGF-1 indicated that there was a significant reduction of ABR threshold shifts at 4 or 8 kHz [9]. The present findings demonstrated that local HGF treatment caused significant effects at 16 kHz. The spread of the growth factors from the base to the apex of the cochlea occurred by diffusion. Thus, the molecular weights of growth factors could influence the distribution of these factors within the cochlea. The molecular weight of HGF is 69 kDa for the α-subunit and 34 kDa for the β-subunit, while that for

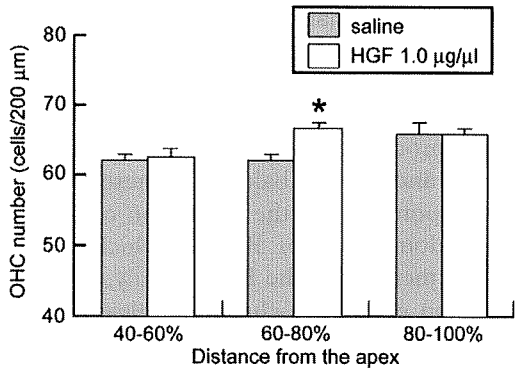

Figure 3. Means of numbers of surviving outer hair cells (OHCs) in saline- and HGF-treated cochleae. In the 60–80% distance region from the apex, the value of HGF-treated cochleae is significantly higher than that of saline-treated cochleae. $*p = 0.003$, t test. Bars represent standard errors.

IGF-1 is 7.6 kDa. Therefore, HGF may be abundantly distributed in the more basal portions of the cochlea as compared with that seen for the IGF-1 distribution.

Previous studies have demonstrated that several agents ameliorate NIHL when they are applied before noise exposure; however, only limited agents including IGF-1 [5] show protective effects by post-exposure administration. Local application of $_{D}$-Jun N-terminal kinase-1 ($_{D}$-JNK-1) peptide, an inhibitor of c-Jun N-terminal kinase, 12 h after noise exposure attenuates NIHL [12]. The efficacy of $_{D}$-JNK-1 peptide has been demonstrated by application via an osmotic mini-pump or a hyaluronic acid gel. In the current study, we used the gelatin hydrogel for sustained delivery of rhHGF into the cochlea. This system may also be utilized for local delivery of $_{D}$-JNK-1 peptide, because the gelatin hydrogel is suitable for sustained delivery of peptides [1,2]. The efficacy of local $_{D}$-JNK-1 peptide application via gelatin hydrogels will be evaluated in the near future. Post-exposure administration of edaravone, a free radical scavenger, also rescues cochleae from NIHL [13]. Locally applied edaravone via an osmotic mini-pump can rescue OHCs even when it is applied 21 h after noise exposure. Edaravone is clinically available; however, how to deliver edaravone into the cochlea continuously is an obstacle for clinical use. Gelatin hydrogels are not suitable for sustained delivery of edaravone, because edaravone is not soluble in water [1,2]. Therefore, drug delivery systems that fit for edaravone should be developed before clinical application of local edaravone treatment.

The mechanisms of cochlear hair cell protection by HGF are not well understood. The cochlear hair cells are degraded through the process of apoptosis after exposure to intense noise [14]. Exposure to intense sound causes production of hydroxyl radicals

in the cochlear hair cells [15], which leads to peroxidation of the mitochondrial membrane and the release of cytochrome *c* from the mitochondria to the cytosol. The Bcl-2 family proteins, Bcl-xL and Bak, are produced in the hair cells following noise exposure, and it is the balance of these two proteins that is responsible for the regulation of this process [16]. Predominance of Bcl-xL, which is an anti-apoptotic member of the Bcl-2 family, results in the suppression of the cytochrome *c* release, whereas a predominance of the pro-apoptotic member, Bak, leads to the promotion of the cytochrome *c* release. HGF is known to up-regulate Bcl-xL, which is mediated by the phosphorylation of STAT3 [17]. Therefore, OHCs might be protected against noise through the same pathway. HGF also has anti-oxidant activity [18], which contributes to the protection of cells from apoptosis. This mechanism could possibly involve the same mechanism of protection provided by HGF for the OHCs. In the mechanisms of NIHL, disruption of afferent dendrites attached to IHCs is also involved [19]. Therefore, a regrowth of the nerve fibers and a re-afferentiation of the IHC is important for recovery of hearing after noise trauma. After spinal cord injury, HGF promotes axonal regrowth resulting in functional recovery [18]. This mechanism could also be involved in the significant reduction of ABR threshold shifts observed in the present study. In order to be able to elucidate the HGF distinct mechanism for the protection of auditory systems, further investigations are required.

In conclusion, the present findings suggest that HGF potentially has a role as a protector of OHCs from noise trauma. We are currently in the process of developing a clinical treatment for SNHL that administers local IGF-1 via gelatin hydrogels. Present results strongly suggest that HGF is the next therapeutic candidate that can be used as a local treatment agent via gelatin hydrogels in SNHL clinical trials.

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